

WORLD'S LARGEST SHELL OF THE
PAPER NAUTILUS
(*ARGONAUTA ARGO* LINNAEUS)

BY RICHARD I. JOHNSON

Sometime during the middle of the last century, Col. Thomas H. Perkins, then one of the richest merchants of Boston, purchased the world's largest female Paper Nautilus shell. Perkins paid the astonishing sum of \$500.00 for it. Upon his demise it was presented, by his family, with the rest of his shell collection, to the Boston Society of Natural History.

Perkins was not a man who knowingly made foolish investments. How did he know he was purchasing the world's largest known specimen? Dr. Cabot (1856: 370), speaking before the members of the Society, affords a clue: "Orbigny ([in] Férussac and Orbigny, 1840: 168) gives the measurements of the largest *Argonauta* he had examined: greatest length of the shell, 9.5 inches." Férussac and Orbigny's sumptuously illustrated monograph of the Cephalopoda was then the last word on the subject.

Since Perkins, like many of his contemporaries, only kept a cabinet of curios, he must have consulted with learned members of the Society before making the purchase. Most likely, he was advised by Dr. Augustus A. Gould, then one of the leading conchologists in the United States. In a report to the members of the Society, acknowledging the receipt of the collection, Gould (1854: 35) gave the measurements of the shell as 11.75 by 7.5 inches, noting that, "the next largest specimen, in the College of Surgeons, London, measures .75 inches less than this."

Tryon (1885: 136), in his admirable monograph on the Cephalopoda, called attention to the world's largest *Argonauta*, but, alas, by then the specimen had *shrunk* to a diameter of 10 inches. Johnson (1917: 1, 5) figured the specimen, at which time it had a diameter of $10\frac{3}{8}$ inches.

Although the Society began transferring its non New England specimens to the Museum of Comparative Zoology in 1914, it was not until just a few years ago that the now Museum of Science relinquished the world's largest Paper Nautilus (now MCZ 293001). Surprisingly, it still has the same diameter it had in Johnson's time.

Is Gould's measurement of 11.75 inches a misprint, in which case the London specimen would still measure .75 inches less than the Perkins specimen, or was he peradventure obfuscating the fact that he had subsequently become aware of the existence of a larger shell elsewhere, and did not want to admit it?

It matters not, the mania for having the world's largest Paper Nautilus is past, and we conclude, in this bit of pedantry, with the observation that Perkins paid too much for the world's largest Paper Nautilus, even if its size is not challenged.

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